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Academia's missing middle

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THERE is a perplexing problem in Bangladesh's "universities," especially in the private universities. A significant number of departments of these universities are staffed by faculty members who are of very senior rank (professors). Then there is a large contingent of fresh teachers who form the lower ranks -- i.e., lecturers and senior lecturers. The ranks of full-time assistant and associate professors are generally quite thin; in some departments, non-existent.

Given this scenario, the private universities are bereft of middle-ranking faculties, hence the term missing middle. Aspire as these institutions may to attain global ranking, getting there is going to be quite a challenge without a full slate of faculty doing quality teaching and research, mentoring junior colleagues, updating the curriculum, building innovative academic programmes, etc.

Many of the senior faculties have retired from their earlier occupations. Their backgrounds can be quite varied and research is not widely practiced by them, especially as many are burdened by administrative duties and teaching loads. As a consequence, mentoring junior colleagues (a significant role of seniors) also suffers.

Associate professors are generally affiliated with the public universities and come to the private universities on lien (given the attractive contracts). They are unlikely to make the bold choice of moving permanently to a private university and help build it into a world-class entity through a sustained programme of research. As a senior Dean recently commented, "they simply don't belong to the private institution; they merely bide their time for the pay check." In fairness to them, however, tenure and job security may play a large role in their unwillingness to commit full-time. High teaching loads may also dissuade those who really want to build careers as researchers and scholars.

Regarding the fresh faculty, there are commitment issues that result in their constant replacement. Some bide their time while looking for that “perfect” and “lucrative” job. For them the university is only a temporary holding post. Those who really want to build a career will need to earn a higher degree. Only the brightest of the lot will manage to secure a scholarship and go abroad.

Whether they will return from abroad after completion of a higher degree is a moot question. Some may return for personal/family reasons or for being unable to find a fit, but for those who have the opportunity to be a part of an established university or who are able to obtain a job that pays on an international scale, they are unlikely to trade the opportunity for a teaching position back home.

Under the circumstances, a key priority that private universities must pursue is to develop and offer in-house in-country higher degree programmes for several reasons: (1) to develop enduring scholarly programmes and advance higher education in Bangladesh that will build global reputation and facilitate ranking, (2) to halt the brain drain, since the brighter of the lot leave the country for study abroad and (3) as solid academic programmes are built over time, the outflow of foreign exchange spent by students on higher education abroad may be stymied or even reversed.

An immediate imperative is thus to form a consortium of (selected) private universities or even a public-private university venture, as a test case, to offer higher degrees, especially M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees. This will immediately help build a career track for junior faculty. To achieve this the consortium will need a critical mass of Ph.D. degree holders with a proven track record (i.e., they have built a record of scholarship by publishing in recognised peer-reviewed journals, written books and/or chapters with recognised publishers, built a research programme, attained international acclaim, etc.) to run the programmes. Since it is unlikely that such a critical mass will be available in a single private university, the answer is to pool faculty resources from several of them.

This is where the University Grants Commission could allow, after careful scrutiny, a group of private and/or public universities to pool their faculty in a given discipline (say engineering,

sociology or business) and offer Ph.D. programmes to equip home-grown faculty with the requisite training and degrees and build indigenous academic programmes of excellence.

There may be some concern that Ph.D. degrees from Bangladesh universities may not have the appropriate status or recognition. This is where collaboration with foreign universities is warranted, especially given the knowledge advances they have made that could potentially be harnessed to develop excellent academic programmes. Thus, it is important, in a specific discipline, to work with selected universities abroad, especially those that have the mission of global engagement. These universities also ought to be willing to offer/grant joint degrees. If the degree seekers have to go abroad, it is important that they complete the last year of the programme back in Bangladesh under joint supervision.

The local supervisors must meet scholarly criteria to be able to shoulder this important responsibility; they must also be offered the right set of incentives so that they are able to continue their scholarly work without facing pecuniary burdens. In addition, those who complete their degrees within the country must be rewarded with attractive positions and remuneration within the community of local universities.

With the two-pronged (local and foreign) approach, the missing middle in the private universities could be efficaciously addressed, thereby giving the local institutions a boost in their academic staffing needs. With a steady increase of properly trained faculty, retained with the right incentives, the quality of private university education ought to improve significantly.

Let us be clear that without faculty well-trained in pedagogy, producing high quality research, attaining global recognition will only remain an aspiration, a mirage.

In their present avatars, if the universities continue on their archaic teaching tracks, churning out students in droves while boosting revenues, they will only be depicted as glorified teaching colleges, not true universities. By filling the missing middle, imbued with strong research skills and where the “creation” of knowledge is at least as important as “disseminating” it, higher education will gain perceptibly in strength.

When the passion for research begins to take root that embellishes teaching and engages with society's multifarious problems, the dream of building world-class universities will become a distinct possibility for Bangladesh. Minus research that possibility is really nil. The missing middle must thus be filled astutely and quickly to serve the true purpose of a university.

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